What Good Are Elections? An Anthropological Analysis of American Elections.

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Devised by anthropologists to look at non-Western societies, this paper uses anthropological ideas about rituals to analyze elections in United States culture. The argument is that elections are a ritual structure deeply embedded in the history and structure of the United States, and its place in the world-system. And, therefore, this is not a ritual practice that can be or should be considered necessarily appropriate for other places. In addition to its ethnographic and theoretical interests, then, the paper is a contribution to applied anthropology. Using data from the earliest years of the country's existence to the present, and focusing on presidential elections, it outlines four different but interrelated schemes. The first follows from the way a Nature/Culture contrast operates. The second employs standard ideas about rites of passage. An analysis of African joking relationships is used to delineate relationships internal to the rites of passage structure. The final model outlines how the entire ritual edifice accomplishes a temporary shift in United States consciousness into an image of mechanical solidarity.

To the memory of Daniel de Coppet

Introduction

This paper analyzes the shape and peculiar character of United States presidential elections, using a complex of ritual models anthropologists have elaborated over the better part of the last century. This kind of ritual analysis was generated in a time when it seemed that anthropology's role was to trade in amazement. 'It has been the office of others to reassure; ours to unsettle. Australopithecenes, Tricksters, Clicks, Megaliths – we hawk the anomalous, peddle the strange. Merchant of astonishment' (Geertz 2000: 64). This paper turns the fruit of that astonishment back onto the dominant culture of the present. It was designed to instruct undergraduates in a course I have been teaching since the late 1970s, and presented in lecture format around the world since the early 1990s.

Michael Panoff (1988), among others, has recalled Lévi-Strauss's suggestion that politics in contemporary society looks like mythology in so-called traditional societies. It is not so much my point to illustrate Lévi-Strauss' comment– and its important implications – as it is to take what we have learned from looking at the myths and rituals of non-western societies and apply them to our present. Born out of fears of ill-thought political action on the part of the United States in the 1980s, the implications of the questions this paper poses are

no less pertinent today as the focus of attention has shifted from Central America and Eastern Europe, all designated by the US to be saved by 'democracy.'

The point to this paper is not that US elections are rituals and therefore they are bad and should, or could, be something else. I do not wish to assert that because these elections are rituals they are sacred and cannot and should not be changed. Recently the attribution of 'culture' to some custom, no matter how bizarre, stupid, or cruel, has led some to give that practice the aura of the sacred, and often untouchable. This sentiment has its reasons when used to protect some group dominated if not overwhelmed by the juggernaut of modern society. Anthropologists, moreover, have no business attempting to modify the customs of other societies in which they do not bear the responsibility of having to live with the consequences of their actions. However, the unequivocal protection of custom is indefensible. Even if we do not know exactly how, we make our culture, are responsible for it, and have to live with its consequences. There is a critical component to this paper.

Over the years this paper was developed and amplified, I had the benefit of being able to juxtapose my understanding of the US by a copy of a lecture Sir Edmund Leach delivered in 1976 called 'Once a Knight is Quite Enough'. Ostensibly about his own knighting, it was in fact a brilliant analysis of the workings of the ritual system and ideology that instils legitimacy in the United Kingdom's social system.

> [M]y lecture is in no way intended as a sideswipe at the British monarchy. Symbolic Heads of State play an important role in modern national and international relations and our British version of that frustrating office has much to be said in its favour as compared with the versions which we encounter elsewhere; the absolute distinction between symbol and reality which the British have achieved in the separation of hereditary Monarchy and elected Prime Minister has a great deal to be said in its favour as compared with, say, your own system of elected Presidents. … (Leach 2000: 194)

Leach believed that the British system distinguished the symbolic, or the ideological, from the practical or pragmatic, whereas in the US these two indispensable aspects of social life are bound up in the same form, at the highest level in the President. I believe this is correct, and it points to peculiar features and constraints of the US system.

Part I: Opposition and Nature and Culture

I begin by employing one of anthropology's most rooted techniques, the degree to which relatively simple oppositions or contrasts structure some of the most basic as well as most abstract and high-level cosmological principles of a culture. It seems to me to be an important fact that so many US Presidents are presented as bastards, products of illegitimate unions, or adopted children. These are all people who in one way or another are seen or see themselves as coming from, or marked by, Nature rather than Culture.

George Bancroft, probably the United States' first great historian, and, like many American significant historians, heavily engaged in political administrations (from Lincoln and Johnson on), told us that George Washington was an 'orphan.' Discussing the virtues that made Washington appropriate as Commander-In-Chief for the Revolutionary Army, Bancroft writes that Washington's

> robust constitution had been tried and invigorated by his early life in the wilderness... At eleven years old left an orphan to the care of an excellent but unlettered mother, he grew up without learning. Of arithmetic and geometry he acquired just enough to be able to practice measuring land; but all his instruction at school taught him not so much as the orthography or rules of grammar of his own tongue. His culture was altogether his own work, and he was in the strictest sense a self-made man; yet from his early life he never seemed uneducated. At sixteen he went into the wilderness as a surveyor, and for three years continued the pursuit, where the forests trained him, in meditative solitude, to freedom and largeness of mind; and nature revealed to him her obedience to serene and silent laws (Bancroft, 1858: 393-394).

Culturally, if not naturally, Bancroft presents Washington as a product of Nature (See Noble 1965: Chapter 2).

In his *The Protestant Establishment* E. Digby Baltzell, one of the truly great US sociologists and historians of 20th century, stressed the fact that Abe Lincoln was the product of a mother who was illegitimate.[1] President Ford's organization subtly introduced into his 1976 campaign that he, Ford, was an adopted child. If Carter's advertisements for the same election could be believed he came from Georgia dirt. Ronald Reagan of course came riding out of the sunset, and it was to his ranch, horse, and wood pile that he regularly retreated while President. Reagan's whole political existence has in fact been an incredible incarnation of the juvenile innocence associated with American culture. George Bush, of course, had

[1] This quality in US leaders was addressed years ago in Jurgen Ruesch and Gregory Bateson (1951).

some difficulties presenting himself as a product of Nature rather than Culture, but, arguably, his Maine vacations, Texas hunting trips, and lack of Eastern eloquence somewhat offset his upper-class background. Being from Arkansas helped Bill Clinton significantly, but probably not as much as having a father who died before he was born and, in the face of Bush, being young and virginal. And it was hardly remarkable that one of Albert Gore's significant biographical details was that he spent his youth shoveling horse manure from his father's rural barn.

In this symbolism Nature is presented as one's scene or background and then, subtly, or not so subtly, turned into a causal determinant of the candidate's virtues. There are and have been many other direct and indirect, successful and unsuccessful, attempts to draw on this symbolism: John Glenn tried to come from the 'final frontier;' Gary Hart from the Colorado mountains. Jesse Jackson borrowed from this rhetoric during the 1988 campaign, but his being carried too much weight from other collective representations for this tactic to be convincing politically. Michael Dukakis employed the form too during his 1988 run as the Democratic Presidential candidate. He had to transcend the cold-hearted, pragmatic, bureaucratic image he projected – and that was projected on him. He played the rhetoric for what it was worth when he stressed his ethnic origins, his Greek heritage. In other times this would have disqualified him because the focus located him in Europe, precisely the place to which Americans usually oppose themselves. But some European identities, especially recently, have been presented as being blood-based rather than time and culture-based. So the tactic was usable.

All these referents draw on American culture's frontier cosmology, the belief that the US is different. This is sometimes referred to as 'American Exceptionalism,' an old version of which underlines the approach to the world in the current Bush Administration– because Nature created the country rather than temporal orders of human devising.

I wish to stress that what is being specified in this Nature symbolism is a kind of person on the one hand and a national identity on the other.

David Schneider (1980) demonstrates that running through many aspects of United States culture is a contrast between the order of nature, or blood, and the order of law, or culture. In the domain of practices most US citizens recognize and refer to as 'kinship,' the central contrast is between blood relatives and 'in-laws.' Relationships between people based on blood are understood as relationships based on something internal to the person, and therefore beyond self-interested action. Such relationships are presented as being incapable of being feigned, or dissolved. Relationships 'in-law' are consciously made, and may be

consciously unmade. People choose to marry one another and many choose to divorce one another, just as they may choose, or be chosen, to work (or not) in a certain relationship. Relationships between in-laws are external to them, and hence necessarily witnessed by the State and usually a church to attempt to add legitimacy to them. Both such institutions are seen, in United States culture, as products of largely human devising, for all intents and purposes artificial.

The two kinds of relationships, in nature and in law, logically generate four kinds of persons. There are those related by blood alone: natural or love, or illegitimate children. Law relates others: spouses, legally adopted children, 'in-laws.' Blood and law relate a set of persons: children born of legally married parents. Finally there are, I believe, people created only in culture, a category of person so far only filled in our science fiction and fantasy life by such moral monsters as Frankenstein, and his modern, cold-hearted, often robotic re-incarnations (e.g. the Terminator).

Although illegitimate children carry a stigma, the political rhetoric that locates candidates, and especially presidential candidates, in Nature attempts to show that the candidate is a pure, essential being, equating him with what is thought to be the essence of America, its Nature. The otherness of the other candidate, however, often comes from a permutation of the relationships in-law, relations in or by culture only. These are variable combinations of individual self-aggrandizing individuals, the pollution of hierarchy, or cold-hearted persons with little depth of feeling.

The essentialism and apparent uniqueness of the symbolic dress, the *masquerade*, of our main political actors often consciously, distinguishes us from other political forms. In some ways the main contrast to the American nature and candidate is England's political-symbolic center, the English monarchy and class system. As noted above in the quote from Leach, that system dresses itself up in time, and increasingly since the 1830s has presented itself as if it was located only in times long ago. As early as 1796 – given that this is the immediate aftermath of the Revolutionary War the point is hardly surprising – the anti-British rhetoric finds its play in the US system. In the 1796 election between Adams and Jefferson 'Republicans called Adams "an avowed friend of monarchy" who plotted to make his sons "Seigneurs or Lords of this country" (Boller 1984: 8). But countries and political forms in addition to England have served this contrastive purpose. The 1840 contest between Martin Van Buren and William Henry Harrison proves an apt illustration. The Whigs had to first democratize Harrison, turning him from 'a well-born, college educated' but ineffective general into a man of the people born in a log cabin. 'But,' in Boller's words:

> [T]he Whigs did more than democratize Harrison; they aristocratized Van Buren. Before they got through, they had turned the President (Van Buren), a dignified and polished but sincerely democratic gentleman, into the effetest of snobs ... In a speech in Congress in April lasting *three days* [Congressman Charles Ogle of Pennsylvania] lashed out against Van Buren for maintaining a 'Royal Establishment' at the nation's expense 'as splendid as that of the Caesars, and as richly adorned as the proudest Asiatic mansion...' The picture of Van Buren as a haughty and somewhat effeminate aristocrat ... was indelibly imprinted in the minds of thousands of Americans during the 1840 contest (Boller 1984: 68-69; my italics).

Ogle's three-day speech should remind us that the cause of our current unease is not the technological ones of our various media, the thirty-second sound bite. Nor is it the 'recent' objectification, commodification, of our political candidates' new(s). For the 1896 campaign Theodore Roosevelt complained that Mark Hanna 'advertised McKinley as if he were a patent medicine' (Boller 1984: 172, footnote omitted). Ideas structuring the U.S. system thus clearly have more consequences than do its means – contemporary media technology.

There are two immediate consequences to these forms of political rhetoric. One is that our politicians cannot seriously debate policies having to do with hierarchy. Another immediate consequence of this set of contrastive collective representations is that relative, real or feigned, ignorance is almost never a liability. This is because such ignorance is opposed to what I mean by 'Culture;' and being so opposed to culture is usually a virtue. For example, not a few people asserted throughout Reagan's Presidential campaigns and administrations that he did not have the intelligence or intellectual background for the job he sought and held. But such accusations probably did more to sustain and buttress Reagan's symbolic hold – he never had any other – on the American imagination. One can hardly commend George W. Bush for using this tactic in the 2000 debates against Gore, for he lost the popular election. Yet it was fairly clear that the pose he struck was designed, and succeeded, to show that Gore was, in American parlance, just a 'know-it-all.' The charge against Reagan, repeated against Bush in 2000, is, more or less, common in our electoral history. For the 1828 election 'When an Adams pamphlet pointed out that Jackson was uneducated and couldn't spell more than one word in four, the Jacksonians retorted that Jackson's natural wisdom and common sense were superior to Adams's book learning and that, fortunately, there were "no Greek quotations" and "no toilsome or painful struggles after eloquence" in him as in the "learned man" in the White House.'

Regarding the 1988 election, it may be suggested that in fact Bush's poor choice of words and relative inarticulateness was his saving grace, for it helped mask the upper-class, crafty, Ivy League background he and his major spokesmen otherwise exuded, espoused, and exhibited.

Part II: Elections as Rituals

Elections as rites of passage[2]

US elections are very large and complex rituals. Elections are installation rites. They move a candidate from being more or less one of the people to that of a person with a different, if not peculiar, status, of the government with very different public responsibilities and obligations. Ever since Van Gennep's original formulation (1909[1960]), it has been recognized that most rituals go through three recognizably different stages. Some kind of *rite of separation* sets the period off from non-ritual times putting the relevant population in the *marginal* or *liminal* time. Some kind of *rite of incorporation* returns the population from the liminal period to more or less normal time.

Rites of separation are often characterized by *masquerade*, whereas incorporation rites frequently exhibit significant *formality*. By masquerade I mean the assumption of an identity that hides another identity. By formality I mean the assumption of an identity that embellishes, accents or otherwise emphasizes only one, hierarchical in this case, feature of an actor's existence.

In the perspective I adopt it is convenient to view a candidate's announcement to run for an office as the rite of separation. This is the moment when the person changes his formal definition from a normal citizen to a candidate for an office, and, of course depending upon how well he – or increasingly she – is known, is given a special status and observed in a new way. Contemporary US culture understands the special focus on the candidate as the necessary judging of his or her character. And the character candidates often assume is that of a 'virtuous person.' By 'virtuous person' I mean the presentation of the person as one apparently unconnected and unbeholden to anyone: he, or she, appears as just principle. This assumption of virtuousness illustrates what I mean by the masquerade of the initial rite of separation.

The nature/culture distinction discussed earlier usually fits in here. In their announcement for office, candidates, especially Presidential ones, often depict themselves as

[2] This analysis draws on and presumes the classic literature on such rites including van Gennep (1960), Turner (1967), Leach (1961), and Beidelman (1966).

coming from or being in the essentialism of American nature; and as not beholden to the artificial entanglements of previous alliances or the hierarchies of culture. This is one reason why many politicians 'run against Washington.' 'Washington' is now the major symbol of embedded hierarchy and complexity in American life – New York and its high culture and banks have previously occupied this role – and either by focusing on it, or one's own derivation from a place far distant, say, the Colorado Rockies in Gary Hart's announcement, one may present one's self as pure and uncorrupted.

The masquerade of the initial announcement, the rite of separation, is contrasted with the formalities presented at the conclusion of the ritual period, the inauguration. The inauguration is a rite of incorporation. In contrast to the initial rite of separation that stressed the candidate's purity, his unalloyed stance in natural principle, the inauguration presents all the candidate's old and new connections. For his inauguration President Jimmy Carter, knowingly or unknowingly modelling his on Andrew Jackson's first inauguration, had common people coming to Washington from all over his personalized and individualized candidacy; Ronald Reagan was famous for bringing to Washington DC the conspicuous wealth of the Republican party, as well as the Frank Sinatra contingent. For his two inaugurations *The Washington Post* was filled with articles about the numbers of privately owned aircraft that flew into Washington for the formalities.

Members of both parties formally view the initiation. So does the neutral State through the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, who, in his office and by holding the Bible, represents connections beyond the local ones fought over during the election. The newly installed office-holder makes appearances at all the Inaugural Balls. All these connections are displayed significantly through the most formal attire our public dress fashions allow. If the electoral process tends to begin towards the 'Nature' side of our collective life, it definitely ends towards the side of 'Culture.'

There are at least two parts to what I call the election's liminal period. For my purposes the first runs between a candidate's announcement for office and the election. The second runs between the election and the installation of the victor for a new term.

The first part goes up to the election pitting candidates against one another to highlight the choice the people are going to make. In such periods anthropologists expect to find activities that invert the normal order, activities that are often personally exhausting, debilitating, funny, bizarre, and sometimes painful. The lack of compromise, the give and take that in fact makes up political life, is one instance of the inversion of reality, as the candidates publicly appear as virtuous, unconnected persons not swayed by the efforts of

others. The total exhaustion exhibited by both Carter and Ford – both were so hoarse at the end of their 1976 campaigns that they could barely speak – at the end of their campaigns is not untypical of rituals of this kind. More shall be said of this period shortly. But this first period closes with the election, which invests *the moral authority of the people* in the winner.

The election winner does not, however, receive the legal authority of the State; this only comes with the inauguration. Anthropologists recognize that this second half of the liminal period can sometimes be very dangerous. Between the Ford/Carter election and the Carter inauguration Henry Kissinger bitterly criticized the duration of this period. He thought nobody was in charge of the country, and that consequently we were particularly vulnerable to our enemies' attacks. This may seem humorous, but one must not underestimate the structure of opposition, almost paranoid opposition, that lies at the center of US political consciousness. If one obvious understanding of this form locates it with oppositions to Communists *throughout* the 20th century, Anthony Wallace (1978) makes clear in his brilliant historical ethnography *Rockdale*, that this feature of US culture has had virtually a fixed place since the Second Great Awakening (1800-1840). In any case, Kissinger was not the first intellectual to be overtaken by the structures of these ritual forms. In 1916 Woodrow Wilson was sure he was going to lose his re-election bid to his opponent Charles Hughes. Given the momentous events of the War in Europe that had not yet drawn in the U.S., he felt obligated to resign on election night so there could be a swifter resumption of authority:

> 'I feel it would be my duty,' he wrote Secretary of State Robert Lansing, 'to relieve the country of the perils of such a situation at once. The course I have in mind is dependent upon the consent and cooperation of the Vice-President; but if I could gain his consent to the plan, I would ask your permission to invite Mr. Hughes to become Secretary of State and would then join the Vice-President in resigning, and thus open to Mr. Hughes the immediate succession to the presidency' (Boller 1984: 210).[3]

Impending danger is often the mode in liminal periods.

Its false or misleading perceptions aside, this period is crucial in American politics because it moves the election victor from the representative of a party or platform to the representative of the State. Those who lose the election quietly disappear from public view, while the victor publicly assembles the surroundings, cabinet officers etc., which represent all of the positions he has attacked or ignored during the campaign. The previous period's

[3] Boller quotes Links (1965: 153-156).

inversions are inverted. Traditionally, Democrats put Republicans or business representatives in Commerce and Treasury posts; Republicans now put blacks – e.g. Pierce at HUD, Sullivan at HHS, Powell at State – or other Others in appropriate positions.

It is of interest that a similar tactic was employed following the Mondale/Reagan presidential contest of 1984. Although Walter Mondale attempted to raise the question of the need for taxes, there was no serious debate about that requirement during the election. But as soon as the election was over a senior Reagan official, David Stockman, publicly raised the issue, and there was, for some Americans at least, a real debate about the wisdom of paying off, that is, raising taxes, or going into further debt. (The public conclusion was that taxes need not be raised: they were.)

To summarize, as with most rituals, our election process goes through a three-part system. The candidate's announcement separates him from normal times and normal people as it defines an abnormal time during which odd behavior comes from the candidate, and some of his supporters. After the election, when the loser drops out, the victor has the moral authority of the people invested in him. And he must begin to assemble the wherewithal to lead the country not as he imagined it in his campaign, but more or less as it really is. This done, the inauguration formally incorporates him into the office. This rite of incorporation adds to the moral authority conveyed by the election the legal authority of the State. The period between the election and the inauguration, however dangerous it may seem, is the beginning of the return to reality from its long leave the campaign constituted.

Politics as 'joking relations'

In the 1796 Presidential campaign, 'Federalists called Jefferson an atheist, anarchist, demagogue, coward, mountebank, trickster, and Franco-maniac, and said his followers were "cut-throats who walk in rags and sleep amidst filth and vermin"' (p. 8).[4] Wilbur Storey, one-time editor of the Detroit *Free Press,* and then the Chicago *Times*, wrote 'President Lincoln 'evinces his appetite for blood' and called the Republican Party a 'bastard offspring of illicit intercourse, and the faulty amalgamation of incompatible genes' (Wills 1997: 32). These are perhaps different terms than we publicly or privately employ now but they call our attention to practices anthropologists used to experience in other cultures.

Beidelman's 1966 article was one of the early illustrations of structuralist or structuralist-like analyses provided by British Anthropologists in the mid-1960s. Like all such

[4] Boller quotes Burner et al. (1980: 124).

papers of the time, apparently organized by the repetition of dyadic or triadic categories, the paper is a study of ambiguity and the role of the ambiguous in the creation and recreation of social life. As with my discussion of the rites of passage paradigm I shall do no more than demonstrate the relevance of this model of so-called joking relationships.

Beidelman's central thesis is that Kaguru life is organized in terms of sets of binary contrasts. Over the course of various cycles – agricultural, annual, life, etc. – acts of individuals, spirits, or gods confuse these fundamental distinctions. Joking relationships are employed during certain rituals involving births, marriages and deaths, during New Year's rituals, and in other times because, in one way or another, the Kaguru sense of order has become obscured. Joking partners and joking behavior serve to reorder the fundamental distinctions through ritual action. Invariably this ritual involves an actor's joking partner taking on some kind of pollution.

Although in almost every election cycle I have observed citizens have complained about how awful the mudslinging was – perhaps especially during the 1988 election – from very early in the 19th century fantastically brutal forms of insult characterized American Presidential elections. Of the 1824 election Boller writes:

> Newspapers glorified the candidates they were backing in extravagant terms and vilified their opponents in abusive language. They made fun of Adams' slovenly dress and 'English' wife, called Clay a drunkard and gambler, charged Crawford with malfeasance in office, and accused Jackson of being a murderer for having authorized the execution of mutineers in 1813. If one took all these charges seriously, sighed one politician, he would have to conclude that 'our Presidents, Secretaries, and Representatives, are all traitors and pirates, and the government of this people had been committed to the hands of public robbers.' (Boller 1984: 35)

British visitors, it seems, were often appalled at the lack of civility in this rhetoric. Although I do not yet have the facts – or appropriate imaginative ordering of them – to sustain the point, I would suggest that the barbarity of this practice, and the horror with which the English viewed it, followed from the aforementioned nature/culture distinction intervening in this part of the election dynamic. Giving up on civility, our candidates seem to have to show they can be brutish.

Although there clearly are some differences between Kaguru joking relations and our elections, I suggest that there are striking similarities. I realized the fundamental similarity when I thought about the so-called mudslinging our candidates customarily engage in. The Kaguru pollute to purify, and so do we. Towards each election committed community

members align themselves in one of two divisions and attempt to redefine how the society should be organized. Although there is continuing debate on its effectiveness, the contest often involves casting aspersions on the other person or party's position.

As among the Kaguru, the United States periodically redefines itself into two units, selects people to represent those units, and, in the course of the election, pits the two against each other. Nominally organized by formal ideas as to what they will do if elected – Party Platforms – in fact much of their behavior entails mutual insulting. From this 'mudslinging' the country is to emerge renewed and redefined. But the ambiguous nature of this interaction pattern is coupled by the ambiguous nature of the candidates, who, given the contradictory nature of the actual society, must constantly speak out of both sides of their mouths.

Let me close this section with a final observation about this phenomenon: As far as I can recall, from perhaps 1956 or 60 on there have been two Presidential elections which failed to engage serious mudslinging, failed to significantly conform to the tenor of a joking encounter. In each of these cases the dominant party/candidate did not have to engage the other party, did not have to defend himself against the other's accusations. Neither the winning candidate nor its party took the other seriously enough to mount a serious campaign against the other candidate. The two examples are the 1972 election between Nixon and McGovern and the 1984 election between Reagan and Mondale. I would like to suggest that it follows, more or less automatically, that after each of these failed elections the country became engaged in exceedingly complex and public scandals and trials: the Watergate affair that led to Nixon's resignation just before he was impeached, and the host of trials that continued into the early 1990s concerning Reagan's administration.

Part III: What Elections Do

From Difference to Identity (and Vice-versa)

If the paradigms I have briefly sketched capture parts of the experiential structure of American political elections, it is by no means clear that the analysis quite explains what it is that the elections do. My analysis locates elections in specific American cosmological tenets – the nature/culture distinction; as installation rites it shows how the format conforms to ritual orders that are so common that the form would seem to represent a given in the human condition; and mudslinging and the very ambiguous nature of politicians suggest an order like that of Kaguru joking relations. Yet I doubt very much that this analysis at all explains why the elections tend to grab much of the American consciousness. Aside from

demonstrating in numerical terms that the winner is victorious, what is it that U.S. elections accomplish?

I shall try to answer this question and bring this essay to a conclusion by placing at the center of my analysis the educational system. […] The relevant sociological concepts here are mechanical and organic solidarity. In conventional terms, mechanical solidarity refers to a social system, or aspect of a social system, that is governed by the conceived similarities of its constituent units. The organic analogy refers to the body: the whole maintains itself through the complementary functioning of differences.[5] My structuralist insight came from thinking about the implications of one of the ways these models allow us to envision transformations through the U.S. election system.

As is true for many western societies and as is well known, American political consciousness strives towards a mechanical ideal, i.e. a representation of experience such that everyone is, under the law or for voting purposes, equal. By contrast, Americans assume everyone will end up having a different job. At an 'economic' level the forms of association are organic. So, politically Americans think mechanically while economically their reality is decidedly organic.

Ideological orientation	**Economic model**	**Political form**	**Education**	**Elections**
Mechanical	-	+	↓	↑
Organic	+	-		

Figure 1. Elections as Transforming a 'This' to a 'That.'

In elections, of course, much effort goes toward establishing equality, a likeness, between the candidate and the voter, or what the voter should be. This attempt accounts for much of the increasingly personal nature of contemporary campaigns. […]

Now the structuralist insight began to take shape when I realized that one massive institution is predicated on converting U.S. citizens from a mechanical conception of citizenship into a realization of organic differences. This institution is America's educational

[5] The initial impetus for undertaking this paper was inspired while reading a letter in *Man* from Louis Dumont. … (Dumont 1987:747-748). However, this particular section was stimulated long before I read his letter by his much earlier paper of 1986 [originally 1965]; see especially footnote 2 (Dumont 1986: 61).

system. The hope is that all children can start school with an equal chance of rising to the top […] But nobody assumes that youths will graduate from the educational system as adults who are all the same. To the contrary, they should graduate having become different, assuming the occupations to which their educational failures and successes direct them. […]

Thus the American educational system begins with persons mechanically defined and turns them into organic beings. Reversing this process, I propose, is exactly what our political system attempts to do. […] [The] homogenization of economic interest and difference into political equality finds, of course, its ultimate realization on the day of the election as people with identical votes choose between, as we increasingly see, identical candidates. But of course the homogenization of these differences, if arguably part of a commonly found characteristic of many social/ritual systems, also makes the United States pay the price of decreasing its ability to discuss real differences. Because, the differences it faces and must mediate are not the differences between equivalent persons.

So, if it is asked what our elections do, an answer is this: They convert, temporarily, the facts of a convoluted and disparate order into an imaginary semblance of mechanical solidarity and unity.

Conclusion

In this paper I have looked at our elections through the lens of four analytical constructs: The place of Nature/Culture distinctions in American culture; Patterns commonly found in rites of passage throughout the world; The play of ambiguity as found modelled in joking relationships; and in the reciprocal movements between mechanical and organic forms in our educational and electoral systems.

I am an anthropologist committed to analyzing and making known the diversity of human existence. So this is not just an issue of the analytical power of several theoretical perspectives in contemporary anthropology. In a rather profound way the issue is one of applied anthropology. For the apparent failures of the US system are not my only concern. When I began the efforts that have resulted in this paper, it was becoming increasingly obvious that our elections were vacuous charades incapable of addressing mounting social problems.

By the late 1980s the US was very sure its own system, ‘democracy,’ was all that Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, China, and elsewhere, needed to be saved. Examples are legion, and a new endeavour is under way as I complete this work. In fact, the words ‘liberty,’ ‘democracy’ and ‘freedom’ are used with reckless abandon by many leading

political and intellectual spokespersons. One is inclined not so much to become cynical about these words' meanings as to think that, perhaps, our politicians are consciously trying to mystify the body politic. In any case, much care needs to be taken so that the spread of what some call ‘democracy’ does not become the uncritical spreading of masked imperialism by another name.

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